Magical realism

Anthony Bailey bravely attempts to pin down Constable's genius in A Kingdom of His Own - though all you really need to do is see the artist's work for yourself, says Charles Saumarez Smith

John Constable: A Kingdom of His Own
by Anthony Bailey
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As the writing of professional art history has become ever more narrow in focus, concentrating on the detailed interpretation of imagery and the circumstances of its production, so a market has opened up for more general books about the lives of artists, approaching the subject of art not through the work itself, but through biography. Anthony Bailey is one writer who has specialised in this genre, with biographies of Rembrandt and Vermeer, and now one on Constable, no doubt prompted by the fact that Constable's life is so well documented in his surviving correspondence.

Bailey provides an easy and extremely readable narrative of the circumstances of Constable's upbringing, his family circle in East Bergholt, his education over the river in Dedham grammar school and the social connections of his family. They were quite prosperous - his father was a well-established corn merchant, but not a member of the local professional classes, so there were drawn-out difficulties and a great deal of social disapproval when he fell in love with the granddaughter of the local vicar. A dutiful and conscientious student of art, who studied at the Royal Academy schools, Constable took a long time getting established as an artist, painting portraits of local worthies and studying all aspects of the local fields and River Stour, while being steadfastly rejected as a member of the academy because he was regarded as a mere painter of landscapes.

Constable did not come into his own as a painter until he was in his forties - by now married to Maria Bicknell, living in Keppel Street, London, and painting what he called his 'six-footers'. These grand and ambitious landscapes were based on in situ sketches, then worked up into big, quickly conceived and roughly scumbled oil studies before being made into the finished work, which can sometimes feel slightly too meticulously composed for modern taste, lacking the atmospheric spontaneity of the oil sketches.

Now so famous, they were not much admired at the time, except by the French: Charles Nodier, who visited the Royal Academy with Gericault, wrote of The Hay Wain: 'It is water, air and sky; it is Ruysdael, Wouvermans or Constable.' Even so, The Hay Wain did not sell, even to his closest friend and partner on sketching trips, Archdeacon Fisher.

By temperament, Constable was pretty cussed - shy, rather conservative (a Tory), but with a strong streak of persistent self-belief, helped by having just enough money from his own and his wife's family not really to need to sell his work. In fact, he rather resented the rare occasions it did sell. When he moved to Hampstead, he would go out every morning on to the heath to sketch the changing clouds. In writing to John Fisher about his chances with the Royal Academy, he said: 'I have nothing to help me but my stark naked merit, and although that [as I am told] exceeds all the other candidates - it is not heavy enough. I have no patron but yourself - and you are not the Duke of Devonshire - or any other great ass.'

Constable was eventually elected to the academy, but the pieces that were admired were the late, much less realistic and somewhat idealised works, like his view of Hadleigh Castle, in which nature has been romanticised and has lost the sharpness of observation of detailed atmospheric conditions, of light and clouds and water, that so distinguished his early work. The issue was presumably one of genre. He was constantly criticised for doing what he did best. George Beaumont, for example, invited Constable to stay at Coleorton Hall in Leicestershire and lectured him about the virtues of the Old Masters. Constable is said to have put a violin on the lawn to show the difference between the greenness of the grass and the tonal values of an Old Master painting.

Bailey's careful study of Constable's life succeeds in getting across his perseverance and the importance of his standing aside from the more fashionable art of Sir Thomas Lawrence - the then president of the Royal Academy, whose style Constable regarded as 'affettuosa' - and Turner, who was much more successful, much younger and who rather patronised Constable as a realist. What one doesn't gain is

any sense of how Constable composed his pictures, how he converted his oil sketches into finished works, how he responded to the landscape of his youth and the extent to which his subject matter was influenced by Tory nostalgia. For a proper understanding of his work, it is better by far to go to the exhibition of Constable's six-footers, now at Tate Britain, and stand in awe at his depiction of the intensity of evening light on the cornfields near East Bergholt.

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